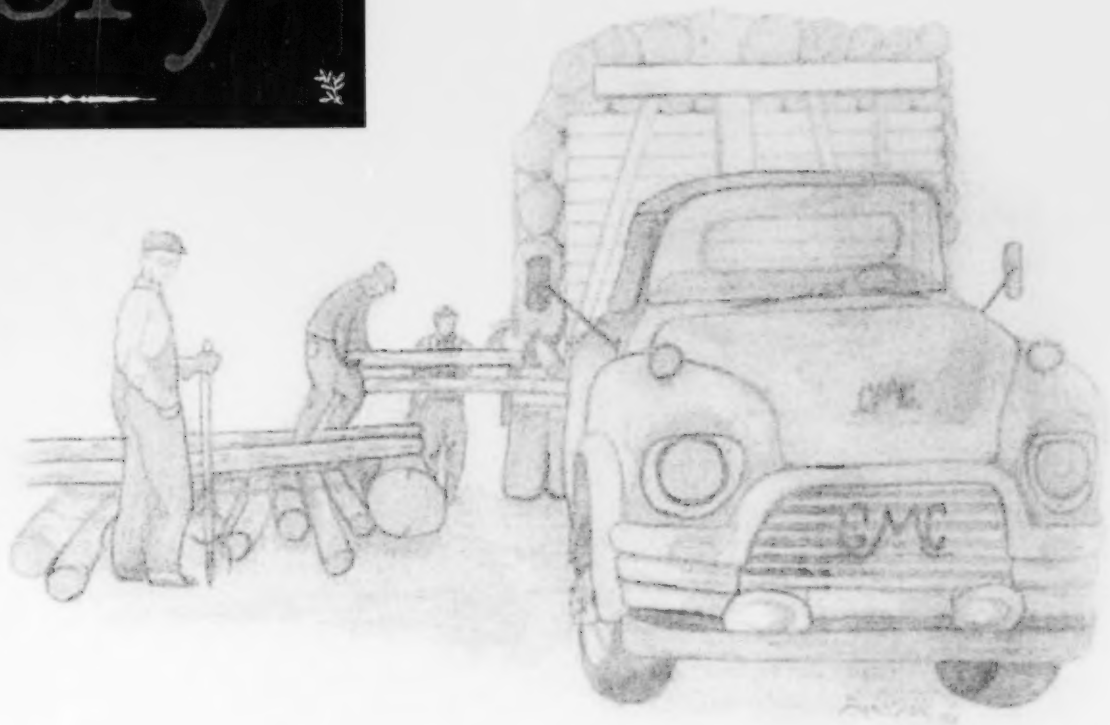
Mel's story



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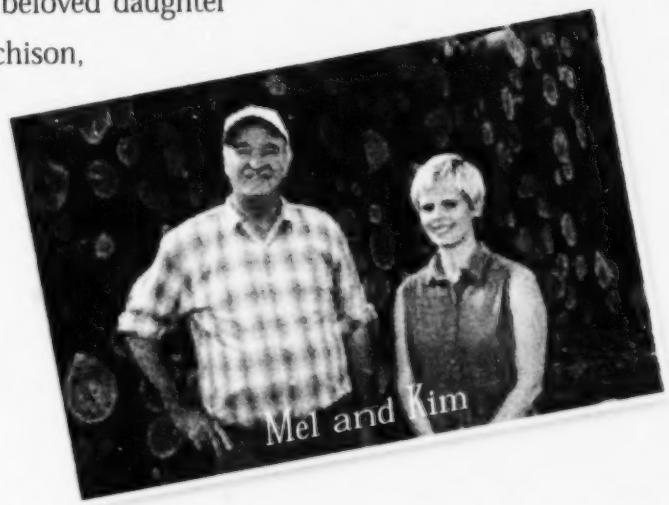
Dedication

el dedicates this project to his late and beloved daughter Diane. Mel also thanks his tutor, Kim Hutchison, for all her support.



Acknowledgements

irst and foremost, this book would not have been possible without Mel Lively's unfaltering desire and commitment to learn to read, both for himself and for his grandchildren. Thank you Mel for sharing your wonderful stories.

Mel's tutor for the past two years, Kim Hutchison, was instrumental in the creation of this book. Mel believes that Kim's patience and her interest in learning about working in the woods was key to his success.

Mel's employer, Elmsdale Lumber Company Ltd., has provided unending support to both Mel and Kim. The company's dedication to lifelong learning and to its employees is admirable. For the past three years, Elmsdale Lumber has been involved with the Workplace Education Initiative coordinated by the Department of Education. Through this initiative, customized learning programs were made available to the company's employees. It is Elmsdale Lumber's belief in and appreciation for

these workplace programs that has ensured the programs' success. The Department of Education is proud to call Elmsdale Lumber an important partner in the creation of a lifelong learning culture in Nova Scotia.

Thank you to Doug McCabe for the beautiful drawings and illustrations that are contained within the pages of this book. Doug's drawings truly make Mel's words come to life. Thank you to Paul Cormier of Communications Nova Scotia for his endless ideas and wonderful presentation of *Mel's Story*. Thank you to Jeannine Jessome for overseeing the book's development and final production.

Finally, funding for this book was provided by Human Resources Development Canada (HRDC) through the Older Worker Pilot Project Initiative, coordinated by the Department of Education. Mel Lively is an excellent example of the work ethic, expertise, and dedication an older worker brings to his workplace. For this reason, *Mel's Story* is an important part of the toolkit the department makes available to organizations that provide career services to older workers.

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A Note to Learners and Tutors

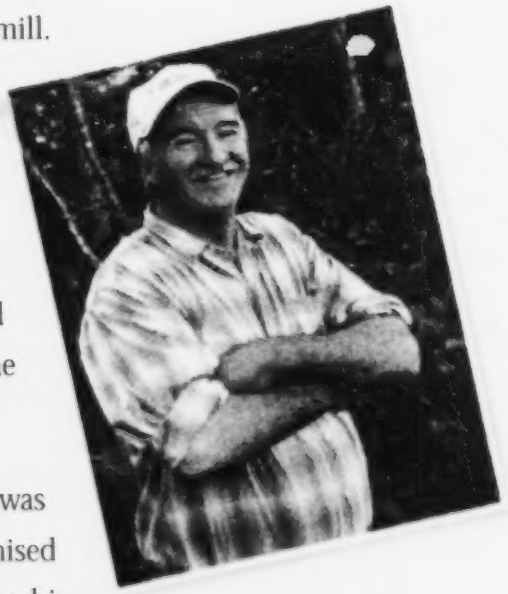
earners and tutors may want to read *Mel's Story* as part of a literacy or upgrading program. Most of the stories in this book are at Levels II and III of the Nova Scotia Adult Learning Program.

There are a number of words in this book that may be new to some readers as they are very specific to the lumber industry. Pictures and definitions have been used as much as possible to help with these words.

Finally, we hope that readers will enjoy these special stories and that the collection will encourage discussion and further reading.

Mel's Story

el Lively is a quiet man who is known by his friends and family as the man who always has a smile. Mel is an older worker. He worked in the woods cutting logs for most of his life. Today, Mel works in the planing mill of a local sawmill. He and his wife Sylvia raised two children, Kenny and Diane (Diney). Mel and his wife are also the proud grandparents of two grandsons.



Mel left school in grade 2 and went to work in the woods. He has always been a hard worker and provided a good home for his family. At a very young age, Mel learned the value of a dollar and developed a good head for business.

Mel looks back over his life with pride. His one regret was that he could not read or write well. Every year he promised himself that this would be the year he would work on his reading and writing.

The birth of his grandsons proved to be Mel's greatest motivation.

When Mel learned about the Workplace Education program at his workplace, he knew that this was his chance.

Mel has worked with his tutor, Kim Hutchinson, for the past two years and is learning to read and write.

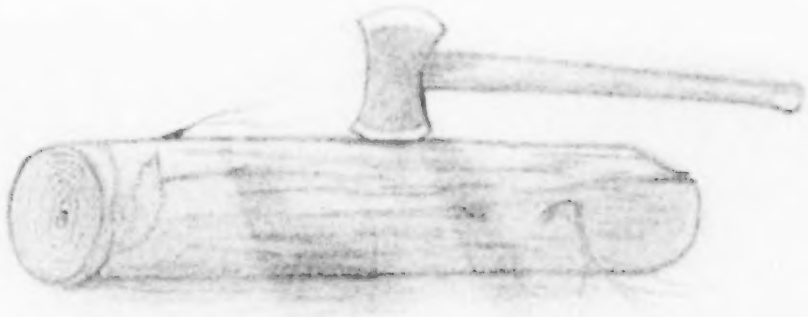
Mel shared with his tutor his memories and stories from his years of working in the woods. Together, they decided to share a few of the stories for this book. The majority of stories in this book are set in the 1960s.

Starting out in the Woods

We worked in the woods because that is what we knew. My brother and I were in the woods when we were really young, watching our father cut trees. I quit school when I was 10 years old and from then on I worked in the woods. My brother and I used to cut fence posts and firewood with a pulpsaw. When we had a winter's supply of wood, my older brother Roy and I would have to saw it all up on the wood horse.

When I was 13 or 14 years old, I went to work in the woods full time. My older brother, who was 16, had the chainsaw. However, we both used the double-headed axes to split cord wood the first winter. We would cut four to five cords a day. At that time, our father had a one-horse sled. He would bring the horse into the

woods on the weekends to yard the wood we had cut. We would load the wood onto the sled, unload it at the woods road, load it into the truck, and then unload the truck at the mill. This was all done by hand. When we were finished unloading the wood, we had to split it as well.



The Chopper

he chopper's job was to cut the trees. To start the day, the chopper had to make sure he had gas and oil, a chainsaw wrench, and a file in case he hit a rock with the chainsaw. He also needed to make sure he had extra gear for his horse.

The chopper started cutting at the back of the woodlot. It was the chopper's job to decide where to start cutting. It was important for the wind to be at his back when he was cutting.

"Snig" Road

On a new lot, there were many tasks. The chopper had to build a barn by a brook for the horse, build the brow*, and cut the snake road (pronounced snig) which is the path for the horse from the woods out to the woods road.

brow* see text and illustration on page 12

Chopping the Tree

he skill of the chopper was to figure out which way the tree was leaning. When he was cutting a big tree, there was no guessing. He had to know which way it was leaning.

To fell the tree, the chopper notched the side of the tree in the direction he wanted the tree to fall. On the other side of the tree, he would cut in almost to the notch. Watch and get out of the way! If the tree did not fall, he had to use a wedge.

After the tree fell, the chopper had to limb it and cut it for length. He had to make difficult decisions about how long to chop the logs. If the log "carried the size good," he tried to keep the lengths as long as possible. He tried to get the most out of every stick.

The Yarder

The yarder was the chopper's right-hand man. It was his job to get the logs out of the woods to the road. The yarder had to work well with the chopper's horse. When working with the horse, the yarder had to make sure to keep the horse fed and watered. He also had to make sure to give the horse its wind when it was working hard.

Yarding the Logs

dogs* forged steel tools used to hold logs in place

whiffletree* a swingbar attached to the horse's harness by which a load of logs is drawn

After the logs were cut and limbed, the yarder went in with the horse. His first job was to drive the dogs* into the log with a mallet. After the dogs were in place, the yarder turned the horse around. He then took the whiffletree* down off the horse's hames and hooked the dogs and the logs onto the whiffletree. The horse and the yarder then would head out the snake road. The yarder usually walked behind the horse to help with the logs. Sometimes a log would hit a stump and get knocked loose. The yarder would just push the log aside to be picked up on another trip.

The number of logs the horse could take each trip would depend on the size of each log. The size of the load also depended on the condition of the snake road. If the road was well-packed snow and the yarding was really good, then the horse could take a

bigger load. Spring was the worst time of the year for the yarder and the horse. No matter how good the conditions were, the yarder had his work cut out for him. He almost never kept up with the chopper.

At the brow, which is the spot where the logs are placed at the road for the truck, the yarder used a tool called a peavey to knock the dogs out of the logs and roll each log down the brow. Then, it was back to the woods for another load.

Peavey

The Truck Driver and the Striker

sideloader* mechanical "arms" that lift logs onto the truck

It was the job of the truck driver to get the logs from the woods brow to the mill. The striker worked for and travelled with the truck driver.

Striking and Trucking

The striker used a peavey to roll the logs down the brow and onto the sideloader* of the truck. The driver then brought the logs up onto the truck with the sideloader. The striker would straighten the logs and chain the load so it would not slide all over the place on the way to the mill.

It wasn't always an easy trip out of the woods. The striker often had to get out of the truck to cut sticks and brush. He put the sticks and brush under the wheels of the truck to help it get over the bad spots.

When the truck got to the mill, the striker and the trucker had a very dangerous job. They had to trip the stakes, roll the load off the truck, and then get out of the way. Sometimes the load would come too fast, and they were in danger of being hit by the load. Other times you had to get chains and pull the load off the truck. You just never knew what was going to happen. The only thing you were sure of was that, if the load of logs rolled over you, there were no second chances.

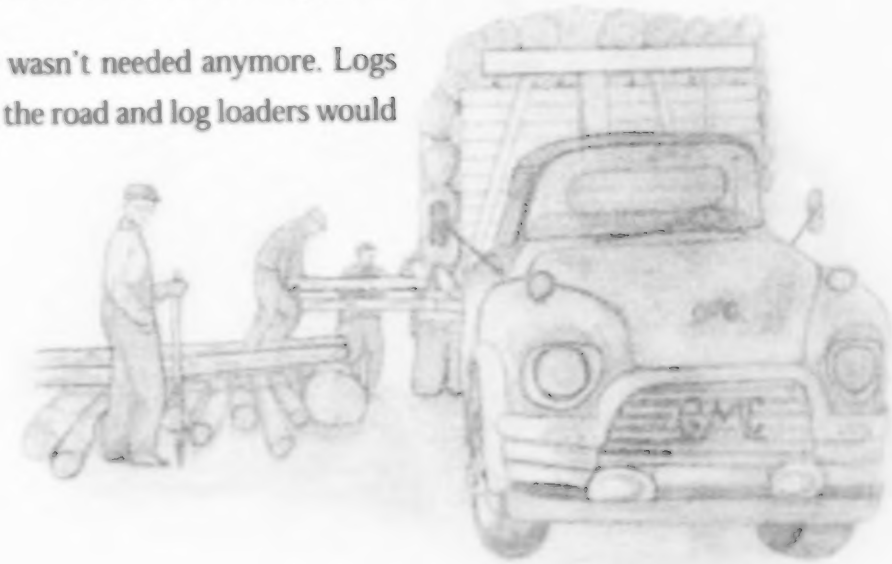
Building the Brow

Both the chopper and the yarder would build the brow. First, they would clear a spot or look for a good clearing on the woods road. They would always try to build the brow on a bank or the side of a hill so that the logs would roll down to the truck easily.

After they made a spot for the brow, they would try to find two long, straight trees. They would cut and limb these trees and lay the logs down about eight feet apart. This would be the average length of the brow. Sometimes the brow would be longer because the log truck couldn't come often enough. In the spring, when the trucks had trouble getting into the woods, the brow would get really long.

The truck drivers were really busy. If the truck driver said, "Maybe I'll be back later," you knew it was time to make the brow longer because the truck driver wouldn't be coming back.

With new technology, the brow wasn't needed anymore. Logs would be put in small piles along the road and log loaders would pick them up.



The Sideloader

he sideloader first showed up in the woods in the 1960s. At first, only a few of the truck drivers had sideloaders, but soon everyone got one. It was quite a job to convert the three- to four-ton trucks to be able to use sideloaders. First the arms and the frame of the sideloader had to be welded to the truck frame. Then, the controls had to be rigged up for the gas and hydraulics.

When the first sideloader came along, people working in the woods thought, "This is the greatest thing there ever was." With this new invention, the striker did not have to roll the logs onto the truck. Instead, the logs were rolled onto the truck by the sideloader. Then, the truck driver, using the sideloader controls, would lift the logs onto the truck. The sideloader could lift one large butt log or two to three smaller logs at a time.

The Weighers

he weighers worked for the Department of Highways. Their job was to make sure the trucks were not overweight. Truck drivers wanted to make the load as heavy as possible without being stopped by the weighers. Truckers were paid by the weight of the load and not the distance. There were no scales in the woods to weigh your load, and the truck drivers were always guessing the weight. If you got caught by the weighers for being overweight, you would get a fine.

In the springtime, the weight you were allowed to haul was lower because of the soft roads. At that time of the year, there always seemed to be more weighers around.

Mel's Accident

It was in Pockwock in the winter of 1989. I had cut a tree like that thousands of times before. But for some reason I will never understand, I walked in front of the tree as it was about to fall.

The tree was sitting on the stump but slowly sliding off. The snow was about two feet deep. That makes moving in the woods pretty slow. While I was listening for the skidder* to come, I walked in front of the tree and was looking at the stump and could see that it was sliding. I threw my chainsaw and tried to move out of the way, but the snow slowed me down. I only got one leg out of the way. I just could not get clear of the falling tree. The trunk of the tree slipped and hit me in the leg just below the knee. When the tree fell completely, the butt of the tree lifted off my leg and freed it.

skidder* machine that hauls logs out of the woods

There was only a little rip on my steel-toed boot. I didn't think my injury was that serious, but the striker told me that I was whiter than the snow. It didn't really hurt, at first, but it was starting to burn.

I got a ride out to the woods road on the skidder. When we got to the truck, the striker took off my boot and told me I would have to go to the hospital. I really did not want to go to the hospital. On the way there, my foot was flapping around like rubber. As soon as we got to the emergency, an orderly came out. I asked him if I would have to stay the night. Six hours later, I was in surgery, and 32 days later I went home.

The tree had ripped my foot all around except for the tendon that attached my big toe. The rest, including the bones, was just hanging there. The doctor said there wasn't much left of my foot. Bones were all over the place, and he said they had operated for hours trying to save my foot. He said they would not have been able to save my foot at all if it had been a few years earlier.

I could not wait to get back to the woods after a couple of months. I was scared for a while but never thought about not going back to the woods. I worked all summer and that fall. I widened out the road to Renfrew and did some other logging, but when the cold hit, it really bothered my foot. I took some time off, and that was when I decided to go to work at the mill in Elmsdale.

Looking Back

ooking back at my life of working in the woods, I would not change anything. I enjoyed the 30 years I spent in the woods. It is hard to explain the open space, the freedom, and the peacefulness. It was hard work. You couldn't do it if you did not like what you were doing. I can't understand people going to work every day and not liking what they are doing.

I miss the woods, but I do like being around the people at the mill. Elmsdale Lumber Company Ltd. has been good to me. I do not have to worry about what is going to happen to me and I have more time to spend with my family. I don't even have to work Saturdays. Although I work 45 hours a week, I feel like I am semi-retired.

The good old days

More Stories

Where's the Pie?

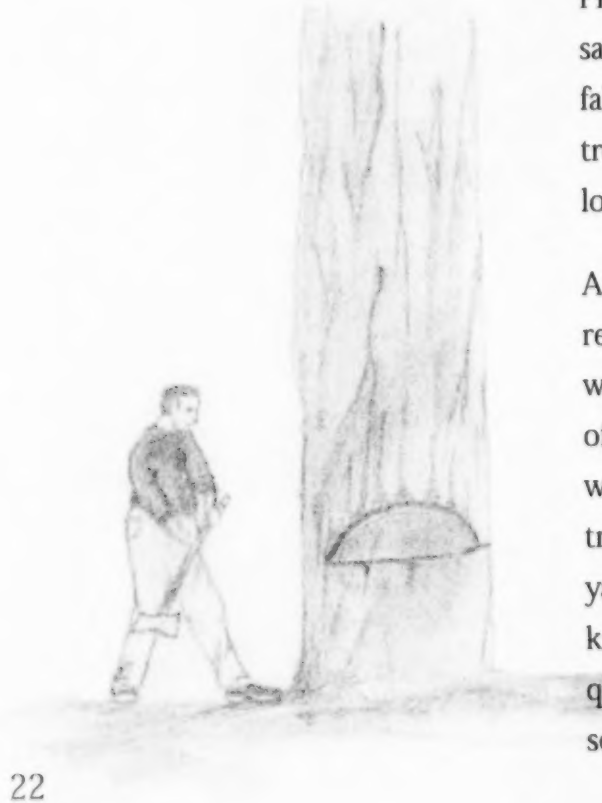
When I worked for Angus MacDonnell, we stayed in the woods camp all week. Angus' wife would send in good home-baked food. Without Angus knowing, one of the truck drivers would always stop in at the camp and help himself to a piece of pie. Finally, one day Angus asked if anyone saw a mouse eating his pie. The striker from the truck said, "No, but the driver is always eating good apple pie." Angus then said, "It was not a mouse after all, it was a big rat stealing my pie."

Keeping Warm at the Camp

During the night at the camp you were either too hot or freezing to death. One night I was determined not to be cold. I stocked the stove up really good and went to sleep. After putting in a hard day in the woods, you could sleep through anything. Well, the stove got red hot, and the camp was really hot, too. Angus got up in the middle of the night and threw open the door. When the fire cooled down, the cold night air was not long cooling down the camp. When I woke up the next morning, my hair was frozen to the post on the wall of the shack.

Another time, the kindling was all wet so I put it on top of the stove to dry out. I must have left it there a little too long because the kindling caught fire. The smoke was everywhere. I put my gloves on and chucked the kindling out into the snow. There it was wet again and half-burnt. That was the last time I tried that.

Felling a Tree



ne day I was chopping trees, and this guy was watching me. He said, "I bet you can't fall that tree anywhere you want to." I said, "Bet I can. Put your cap anywhere you want this tree to fall." So the guy did, and as luck would have it, I chopped the tree just right. The tree came down square on his cap. The guy looked really amazed. I know it was not just all luck.

Another time when I was cutting in the woods, the snow was really deep and we had to wear snowshoes. I never did like walking in snowshoes. Anyway, we had orders to go to the back of the lot until we saw a barbed-wire fence. Well, we looked, but we did not see any fence. We found a really good place with big trees and started cutting. Half-way through the morning, the yarder said that he just got caught in a barbed-wire fence. We knew we were on the wrong side of the fence. We got away as quickly as we could because we realized we were cutting someone else's lot.

Horse Traders

eople would go around from town to town to buy and sell horses. The stories were always the same. One time, we bought a horse from a trader who said the mare was the best he had ever had. We later found out that this mare couldn't even pull the hair off your head. She was balky, and we knew if we pulled her too much she would get balkier and not pull at all. When we hooked a couple of logs to her, she would just back up. So my father decided to fix the horse with a whip. My brother and I told my father that he was hurting the horse. My father replied, "I hope so." The mare then turned around and started yarding logs. But this only worked sometimes.

Horse traders would walk horses for miles. If the horse trader was in Elmsdale and someone in Rawdon wanted a horse, the trader would walk the horse all the way there. Some used trucks but not all of them did. Horse traders would buy a horse for $75.00 and sell it for $100.00.

You never really knew what you were getting in a horse. Sometimes you would get a really good yarding horse. Other times you would get one who ran away, kicked, or bit.

Some older people used to have a way of telling if the horse was good. If they said it would be a good horse, it usually was. Some said you could tell how old a horse was by its teeth. The horse trader might tell you the horse was 8 years old, but it may have been getting near 30 years old. That's just too old to work in the woods.

Some of the horses were Clydesdales, but we called them Clyde horses. The rest were work horses of different breeds, but they were definitely not saddle horses.

The Yarder Keeping up with the Chopper

Sometimes the chopper would get ahead of the yarder with the logs. This would make the yarder mad, and the yarder would get slower. To get the yarder going again, the chopper would take the cover off the chainsaw and pretend that it wasn't working well. The yarder would think that this was his chance to catch up and he would work like anything to do it. When the yarder would get caught up to the chopper, he would put the top back on the chainsaw and start cutting more. That way, the chopper could get the yarder to work like hell.

When you spent all day, six days a week, in the woods, you had to try to have some fun. The chopper and the yarder would fool around all day. The chopper would say, "I wonder where I could get a few good yarders?" and the yarder would say, "You only need one good yarder when you got me." The more they argued, the harder they worked. Woods entertainment, good clean fun.

Woods entertainment.
Good, clean fun.